THE AMERICAN PURITAN ELEGY

A Literary and Cultural Study

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA http://www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Monotype Baskerville 11/12½ pt. *System* QuarkXPress™ [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Hammond, Jeffrey.
The American Puritan elegy: a literary and cultural study / Jeffrey A. Hammond.
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in American literature and culture 123)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0 521 66245 1
1. Elegiac poetry, American – History and criticism. 2. American poetry – Colonial period, ca. 1600–1775 – History and criticism. 3. American poetry – Puritan authors – History and criticism. 4. American poetry – New England – History and criticism. 5. Literature and anthropology – New England – History. 6. Christianity and literature – New England – History. 7. Puritans – New England – Intellectual life. 8. Death in literature. 9. Grief in literature. I. Title. II. Series.
PS309.E4H36 2000
811.009′3548 – dc21 99–16898 CIP

ISBN 0 521 66245 1 hardback

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CHAPTER I

Monuments enduring and otherwise

The simple funeral took place late in the afternoon on a gray Monday, the first day of December, 1712. As the seventy-year-old minister walked slowly toward the burial ground, leading the wagon that bore the plain coffin, he found comfort only in his belief that David Dewey's passing played some part, as yet unknown, in God's plan. On his arm leaned the widow, Sarah, closely followed by the four Dewey boys, ranging from four to twelve years old. A two-year-old daughter, gravely ill and being tended to at home, would die within two weeks. Behind the minister, the family, and the wagon filed about three dozen mourners. The minister patted Sarah Dewey's hand and whispered a few words into her ear. She lowered her handkerchief briefly from behind her veil and nodded.

David Dewey, a leading citizen of Westfield, a small town nestled in the Connecticut River Valley, was dead at thirty-six. A member of the Westfield church for twelve years, he had been ordained as one of the congregation's two deacons only six months earlier. Since arriving as a young man to help his uncles run their sawmill outside of town, he had served as constable, selectman, and schoolmaster. As his recent selection as deacon affirmed, Dewey was also a pious man. Four years earlier he had composed sixteen prose meditations on the faith; additional exhortations to his children were found among his papers after his death. "Are the things that are here," he had written, "all beautiful in their Season; how beautiful then is our Glorious Redeemer? who is altogether Lovely & Beautiful; who is the Head of Excellency?"[1]

By all accounts, David Dewey was the ideal New Englander, a man in whom inner piety and civic duty merged to create a perfect life in the Lord. Among Dewey's writings was the following advice to his children: "You must not Play nor tell Stories on the *Sabbath-Day*: but read your Books, and pray to God, and mind what the Minister sayes" ("Edward Taylor's Elegy" 80). That minister was Edward Taylor, whose

own writings would shed surprising new light on Puritan inner life when they were rediscovered over two centuries later. As the procession moved silently along, Taylor stared at the muddy road and carefully guided Sarah Dewey away from the ruts. Hearing the coffin shift slightly in the wagon, the old minister reflected on how it rained on the just as well as the unjust. He and his beloved Elizabeth, now over twenty years dead, had certainly been witnesses to that. They had made this same walk together to bury five infants, and then she was gone. Taylor worked long and hard on her elegy, which he carefully preserved along with courtship poems he had written as cherished mementos of their love. Although he dearly loved his second wife, Ruth Wyllys of Hartford, he could never preside over a burial without thinking of Elizabeth and the babies. Each new death reminded him of how much he had trusted in the flesh and how severe a penalty God had exacted.

Ruth had borne him six children, but Taylor, fifty-one when the first daughter arrived, was not as close to them as he was to Elizabeth's three surviving children. Moreover, urgent matters had left him little time to spend with his new family. Solomon Stoddard, minister at nearby Northampton, continued to press for changes in administering the Lord's Supper, and was allowing people to participate in the Sacrament who had not first professed their conversion in Christ. Taylor harbored no personal animosity against his colleague, whom he knew to be a holy man, sincere in his beliefs. But he could not fathom how so well-meaning a shepherd could stumble so badly as to debase the Sacrament, and with it, nearly every principle that the brethren had struggled to uphold for nearly a century. Although Taylor had preached tirelessly on the issue, town after town was adopting Stoddard's open Supper. Not even his old friends Increase Mather and son Cotton, who shared the powerful pulpit of Boston's Old North Church, could stem the tide. Some members of Taylor's own congregation were calling for Stoddard's changes, but Westfield would not lapse into such error as long as he was in charge. For three decades Taylor had meditated privately on the sanctity of the Sacrament, pouring out his love for Christ in impassioned poems written in spare moments. These private exercises brought him unspeakable comfort. New England might be sliding into apostasy, but God's garden could still be firmly paled and lovingly tended in Westfield – and in the sanctuary of his heart.[2]

David Dewey had been a firm ally on the issue, a stabilizing voice in a congregation that was often contentious. Now he was dead, and at the very time when he was most needed. As the procession entered the burying ground, Taylor suddenly felt very old. Dewey reminded the

minister of his faithful charges during those early years in Westfield, after one of Dewey's uncles had called him to the valley from Harvard. In those days believers longed with all their hearts to make a sincere profession of their faith, and Taylor could remember when many of them were harder on themselves than the Word required. No pastoral duty had given him greater pleasure than offering such souls the encouragement which, in their humility, they so clearly deserved. Some thirty years ago he had even written an examination of conscience in dramatic verse, which he circulated among those believers whose tender scruples held them back from their professions. Some had been converted by that poem, and Taylor took special pride in having used his God-given eloquence to bring them to Christ. The thought that some of those people, now in late middle age, were filing slowly behind him made him smile inwardly despite his dark mood.

As the procession gathered around the gravesite, Taylor nodded to several young men, who slid Dewey's coffin from the wagon and placed it gently on the ropes lying next to the open grave. Although fierce winds and rain had pelted the valley the night before, there had been a recent stretch of unusually warm weather, and the gravediggers had managed to do their work without too much difficulty. The old minister said a few words over the grave, words not so different, really, from those he had spoken dozens of times among these stones over the decades. As at Elizabeth's burial, he knew that he was to proclaim – and to proclaim it so clearly that no hearer in heaven or earth could miss it – that there was but one faith and one salvation. David Dewey had lived a life so clearly stamped with holiness that God's grace could be plainly seen by all who looked upon him.

Taylor concluded with a short prayer. After a few moments of silence he nodded to Thomas Noble, Westfield's surviving deacon, who removed a piece of paper that had been pinned to the coffin and handed it to the minister. Taylor hunched over slightly and began to read from the sheet in a trembling voice as he squinted against the fading glare of the winter sky.

> David by Name, David by Nature, shew
> Thou art Belov'd (if that thy Name say True)
> By God and Christ, who in thee gave a Place
> Unto his Image brightly laid in Grace . . .
> ("Edward Taylor's Elegy" 82)

The elegy, soon published along with Dewey's writings in a commemorative pamphlet, would be Taylor's only complete poem to appear

in print during his lifetime. The Westfield minister, who apparently never sought publication for any of the other verse that would make him famous two centuries after his death, must have taken considerable pride in the poem. If he thought that it had not performed its sad task competently, even well, it is unlikely that he would have allowed it to appear in a permanent commemoration of so beloved a citizen as David Dewey, least of all a commemoration that the minister probably guided into publication. Not everyone, even at the time, would have been pleased with Taylor's efforts. Just ten years later, the young Benjamin Franklin would reduce this kind of elegy to a mock recipe in his brother's *New-England Courant*. Writing as Silence Dogood, a perversely Matherian busybody, Franklin purported to answer "the Complaint of many Ingenious Foreigners. . .*That good Poetry is not to be expected in* New-England." Silence selects as her proof-text an "*Extraordinary* Piece" written by Dr. John Herrick of Beverley on the death of Mehitabel Kittel, wife of John Kittel. Herrick's lament for "a Wife, a Daughter, and a Sister," Silence gushes, creates "a Sort of an Idea of the Death of *Three Persons*," which "consequently must raise *Three Times* as much Grief and Compassion in the Reader." Dubbing such verbal performance "a new species of Poetry," Silence places the work in a class by itself. It is, she proclaims, "*Kitelic Poetry*" (19, 21). In an accompanying "Panegyrick" by "Philomusus," Franklin attests that the author of so fine a poem, that "great Bard" and physician who brought "Learned Doggrell, to Perfection," has been blessed with unusual opportunity to exercise his muse: "For if by Chance a Patient you should kill, / You can Embalm his Mem'ry with your Quill." So great a poet could never receive a worthy embalming from another: Dr. Herrick should at the very least "Write your own Elegy against you're Dead" (23).

Franklin's joke was based, of course, on his reader's recognition that "Kitelic" poems were hardly new. They had in fact become the single most popular "species" of verse in New England, having worked their way into an increasingly elaborate ritual of mourning practiced by a people whose outspoken denunciations of ritual would be taken too literally by later observers.[3] The passing of a devout soul virtually demanded a poem, a verbal marker of the deceased's victory and an encapsulation of the Puritan view not just of leaving this world but of living in it. Like all funerary texts, the Puritan elegy extended consolation in part because of its predictability. What made it distinctly "Puritan" was the fervor with which it both reaffirmed the communal mission of God's people and situated individual readers within that

mission as a precondition to paying proper respect to the dead. Nor was such an office to be performed in secret. In early New England, as in pre-industrial societies generally, nobody died alone, and Puritan grief was not "private" in the sense that it usually is for us: Puritan mourners could not escape Donne's conclusion that "any man's death diminishes me" ("Devotions" 68). Not surprisingly, the initial impact of a death on these close-knit communities was frighteningly disruptive. Not only had a beloved person been taken, but God's workers in the world, scarce enough to begin with, had been diminished by one. While the elegy gave full voice to this calamity, it also directed its audience toward a deeper and more reassuring reading of the event as a confirmation of saving faith. It was this reassurance that kept early New Englanders writing and reading these poems by the hundreds. Conventions become conventional because they satisfy, and the comfort that these stylized poems brought to Puritan mourners lay in the text's transformation of death's disruption into a reaffirmation of belief. Elegy brought comfort precisely because it did *not* surprise. Nearly every formulaic trait satirized by Franklin made survivors feel like participants in an insistent and ongoing rewriting of death into victory. Although these poems came with greater frequency as the seventeenth century progressed, their underlying form remained essentially unchanged from the first settlement to Franklin's day. Such stability, though it defies modern demands for originality, suggests that the Puritan elegy worked, and worked well, within the ritual of grieving that it was written to demonstrate and encourage. Strip away that ritual, and the life of the text evaporates.[4]

To readers alienated from the original affective contexts of the Puritan elegy – to readers like Franklin and us – it might seem to embody mindless habit, artistic laziness, perhaps even the hypocrisy of writing what one knows to be false. That the commemorated dead in poem after poem are all stamped from the same pious mold was certainly not lost on the young Franklin. "Having chose the Person," Silence Dogood cites from the recipe left by her late "Reverend Husband," "take all his Virtues, Excellencies, &c. and if he have not enough, you may borrow some to make up a sufficient Quantity: To these add his last Words, dying Expressions" and "a Handful or two of Melancholly Expressions, such as, *Dreadful*, *Deadly*, *cruel cold Death*, *unhappy Fate*, *weeping Eyes*, &c." These "Ingredients" are to be poured into the cauldron, in Franklin's view, of New England's ills: "the empty Scull of some *young Harvard*." After a liberal sprinkling of "double Rhimes," Silence concludes, "you must spread all upon Paper, and if you can procure a Scrap of Latin to

put at the End, it will garnish it mightily; then having affixed your Name at the Bottom, with a *Maestus Composuit*, you will have an Excellent Elegy" (21–22). As a parodic catalog of the elegy's distinguishing traits, Franklin's "Ingredients" were devastatingly accurate. The chant-like reiteration of the loss, the deceased's pious last words, virtues seemingly "borrowed" to depict souls too good to be real, stock "Melancholly Expressions," frequently even the Harvard authorship – all had become indispensable to a "species of Poetry" with which New Englanders had been intimate for nearly a century. Franklin's attack on what he saw as extreme sentimentalism and rote convention, however, bears comic witness to what happens when Puritan verse is isolated from the theology that fueled it and from the psychological processes that it was written to promote. No type of poem, certainly, was more popular among Puritan readers than the elegy, and none offers a better point of departure for reconstructing the experience of poetry as most early New Englanders knew it in their daily lives. As John Draper noted seventy years ago, the public role of elegiac verse makes it "an admirable medium for the study of social ideals" (*Funeral Elegy* viii). Although Draper was apologizing for artistic deficiencies in the poems he was examining, the social and the aesthetic are far more difficult to separate than in 1929. Still, modern critics have joined Franklin – and in his hostility toward Puritan ideology, Franklin *was* a "modern" reader – in forgetting that Puritan elegies were written to formula because the formula helped actual readers cope with actual loss. Indeed, if seen from a critical perspective that incorporates rather than dismisses or apologizes for the "social" functions of art, these poems emerge as models of cultural adaptation, as remarkably successful discursive performances.

The need for frameworks more sympathetic than Franklin's for reading these distant poems would be suggested, if for no other reason, by the fact that early America's finest poet wrote at least ten elegies and, as we have seen, allowed one of them to stand as his only published poem. Modern readers might expect that whenever a poet with Taylor's gifts works within a conventional genre, the outcome will deviate sufficiently from the norm to reveal the stamp of original genius on worn-out clay. But Taylor did not dispense with the elegy's most rigid conventions, however trite they seemed to Franklin and others who have approached these poems as "literary" texts – in the then-new mode of Dryden and Cowley – rather than as ritual texts firmly wedded to cultural practice. For all the inventive power evident in Taylor's better-known poems, the old minister anticipated Silence Dogood's formula almost

exactly. Mehitabel Kittel, trisected into wife, daughter, and sister, finds her masculine counterpart in Taylor's Dewey, who is lamented as a father bringing his children "up to Christ," a husband whose grace "drencht" his "Consort's heart," and a citizen whose "Grace did make thy Township Neighbourhood / Among us, very pleasant, usefull, good" ("Edward Taylor's Elegy" 82–83). Also consistent with Franklin's satire, Dewey's inner life is indistinguishable from that of any saved soul. Taylor builds Dewey's weeping on a particular Fasting Day into an elaborate pun on the deceased's "Dewy Tears" of remorse, extending the pun to encompass the deceased's "Dewy Rhymes" of edification to his "Offspring all." Dewey's "Conversation," which "gave a Shine / Of Prudence, Peace, and Piety Divine," meets Silence's Dogood's demand for an elaborate yet generalized listing of the deceased's "Virtues" and "Excellencies." Taylor might even be accused of "borrowing" some of these virtues, as Silence recommends, reaching as he does into an unseen realm to describe Dewey's persistence as a saint who "Cudgeld" his body of sin, never slacking the "raine" he kept on a carnal element portrayed in equally paradigmatic terms. Smaller touches also bear out Taylor's commitment to the formula that Franklin would lampoon. As was mandatory in "Kitelic" verse, Taylor dutifully records the deceased's "last Words, dying Expressions, &c." by reporting Dewey's deathbed wish to "*be with Christ to Morrow*" as well as his prophetic remark on the winds that blew as he lay dying: "*The Wind is high. . .But by to Morrow I'st above it be*!" Although Taylor keeps Silence's "Melancholly Expressions" to a minimum, he concedes at the poem's close that Dewey's survivors must borrow his "Coffin's Cambarick" to "wipe off of our Eyes the Tears of Sorrow." Taylor also manages, as Franklin would soon recommend, to "procure a Scrap of Latin" to "garnish" his poem: his "*Sic flevit mastus amicus*, E. T." is a nearly exact equivalent of Silence's "*Maestus Composuit.*"

Although Taylor was no longer a "young Harvard," he certainly remained an old one. If the aging minister ever chanced upon a copy of issue Number 7 of the *New-England Courant*, Franklin's parody made no impact on how he applied his poetic gifts to the occasion of death. Increase Mather died scarcely a year after the Dogood parody appeared, and during the next two years Taylor carefully worked through four versions of an elegy for his old friend written in the same old style. Taylor saw no need to abandon a form of commemoration that was still vital for him, least of all for such trivial reasons as bowing to literary fashion or heeding the benighted carpings of Boston wits. In elegy, as elsewhere,

Taylor wrote as he saw fit. When Louis Martz warned long ago against seeing Taylor merely as a "burlap version" of George Herbert, he was confirming a simple truth that many critics of the time were ignoring: Taylor's poetry differed from Herbert's for the simple reason that he was not trying to imitate Herbert ("Foreword" xviii). Similar integrity – most would say stubbornness – marks Taylor's elegies. Taylor adhered to a commemorative formula already outmoded in England and ridiculed by urbane Bostonians because he chose to, not because he tried to escape it and failed.

When we say that Taylor had the skill to make the Dewey elegy significantly different from the hundreds of other elegies that New Englanders had been penning for nearly a century, what we are really saying is that he could have written a poem of greater interest to modern readers. Such a poem might have told us more about Dewey the individual and less about Dewey the generic believer, whose carnal element would be raised "at the Resurrection of the Just" to rejoin the soul to sing "with Saints and Angels" in the celestial choir. Such a poem might have contained more philosophical musing and less theological dogma – perhaps some meditating on the cycles of nature or the power of love or memory to conquer time, perhaps even a few lines about the sad permanence of art over the fragile deceased, whose immortality would be ensured by a poetic monument more lasting than bronze. These options were indeed available to a poet whose Harvard schooling had acquainted him with their classical precedents in the poetry of Theocritus, Vergil, and Horace. But Taylor made other choices, and the fact that he did so underscores the challenge of dealing with older texts that violate modern notions of literary worth. The critical dismissal of hundreds of poems like the Dewey elegy illustrates the difficult intersection of historical objectivity and irresistible taste. Most of us would agree that the occasion of death has produced some of the most sublime poems in the canon. These poems embody the faith that language can defeat mutability – that death's sting can be abated by the compensatory power of timeless and universal art. There has always been some truth in William Empson's wry comment that the occasion of death is "the trigger of the literary man's biggest gun" (*Collected Poems* 58–59). Faced with one of the most artistically auspicious occasions imaginable, early America's best poet seems to have let us down.

Our disappointment with Taylor's poem for Deacon Dewey is sharpened, of course, by the enormous and longstanding prestige of the pas-

toral elegy, a form of commemoration strikingly different from those that issued from New England's pens. One critic writing in the late 1960s put the contrast this way: "To remember that while Puritan Milton was writing 'Lycidas,' his American coreligionists were composing acrostic elegies is to recall how provincial American Puritanism quickly became" (Waggoner 13). The canonical elegy – in practice, the pastoral elegy – has reinforced the critical tendency to divorce the Puritan commemorative poem from its ritual milieu and to read it against an aesthetic agenda shaped by the great poems of mourning in English: Shelley's "Adonais," Tennyson's "In Memoriam," Whitman's "Lilacs," Arnold's "Thyrsis," Yeats's poem for Major Robert Gregory, Auden's poem for Yeats – all of which participate in the pastoral tradition of "Lycidas." An elegiac standard shaped by such poems, seductive as it is, obscures the fact that New England's elegies, including Taylor's, were written for reasons quite different from those imputed to Milton and his successors. At the heart of this difference lies a conflict between formalist and functional approaches to the poetry of mourning – and it is a conflict that is by no means new. Its roots lay in Renaissance England, where Protestant reforms initiated lively debate over what constituted proper mourning. John Canne, an advocate of the newer, plainer customs, urged in 1634 that funerals be conducted "without either singing or reading, yea, without all kind of ceremony heretofore used, other than the dead be committed to the grave, with such gravity and sobriety as those that be present may seem to fear the judgments of God." In 1645 the Westminster Convention endorsed what had become increasingly popular practice by issuing the following directive: "let the dead body, upon the day of Buriall, be decently attended from the house to the place appointed for publique Buriall, and there immediately interred, without any Ceremony." Such Puritan plainness struck some, however, as going too far, even to the point of casting dishonor on the deceased. In 1631 John Weever complained that "wee, in these days, doe not weepe and mourne at the departure of the dead, so much, nor so long, as in Christian dutie we ought" (Stannard 104, 101, 105). It was within this debate, with opinion ranging from disgust at pomp and ceremony as a relic of "Romish" practice to horror at Puritan-inspired funerary rites so plain that they struck many as being disrespectful, that the varieties of English elegy developed. Like so many other aspects of life in early modern times, mourning was enlisted in an ideological war that transcended the immediate occasion. All elegies honored the dead, but the manner in which they did so revealed the living for who they were and where they stood.

The writing of elegies flourished during the Renaissance with the rise of literacy, printing, humanistic individualism, and a growing nationalism that prompted imitation of the great models of antiquity in the service of a literary Albion whose worthies were thought to deserve equal commemoration. Laments at Sidney's death in 1586 stimulated the popularity of elegy, and the raft of poems commemorating the death in 1612 of Prince Henry, son of James I, solidified its status as the era's dominant genre of public verse. A relaxation of traditional strictures on grief and its expression during the later sixteenth century contributed to this popularity (Pigman 3, 126), as did the role played by elaborate funerary rites in shoring up the waning power of the aristocracy (Stone 572–81). In order to understand the verse commemorations that Taylor and his New England contemporaries wrote, we need to remember that many options were available to seventeenth-century elegists, only one of which was subsequently designated as "literary." This, of course, was the highly artificial and elaborate pastoral elegy, shaped chiefly by Spenser's lament for "Dido" in the "November" eclogue from *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579) and his poems for Sidney, or "Astrophel" (1595). Ironically, especially given its longstanding place in the canon, the pastoral elegy remained relatively rare in the nearly sixty years between the "November" eclogue and the climax of the form in "Lycidas." Most elegists during this period took a more direct approach to verbal mourning, one that drew on Elizabethan patriotism and patronage and, later, Jacobean melancholy and popular devotional traditions. This type of poem, usually called the "funeral" elegy to distinguish it from the pastoral, was frequently incorporated into funerary rituals, with the poem recited at the service and pinned to the hearse during the procession. Many Tudor and Elizabethan funeral elegies consisted of laments for nobility penned for general distribution, as illustrated by the popular poems of Thomas Churchyard and George Whetstone. Initially, funeral elegies reflected all religious persuasions, and ranged from what Draper termed "Cavalier panegyric" to the more theologically oriented "Puritan lament" (*Funeral Elegy* ix), the latter shaped by a turn to piety and introspection influenced by Donne's 1612 "Anniversaries" for Elizabeth Drury and the outpouring of laments at the death in 1646 of the Protestant champion, the Earl of Essex. By this time the Puritans had taken over the more explicitly religious elegy, stylizing its forms, intensifying its millennial fervor during the Civil War, and using it to reinforce the legitimacy of Cromwell's rule. By the early 1650s the funeral elegy had become so closely associated with religious dissenters

that the anonymous "J. C." equated "common formall Elegies" with the "Geneva Jig."[5]

The English funeral elegy could scarcely have posed a sharper contrast to the classically based pastoral, in which the frank artifice of a timeless and placeless landscape encouraged a retreat from mutability into the static sanctuary of art. The death of a poet provided a special opportunity for the pastoral elegist to confirm his professional vocation and assert virtuosity as a poet rising to the sad occasion. To write elegy was both to acknowledge the void left by the deceased and to fill it as the rightful successor. The pastoral elegy thus came to play a special role in witnessing the poet's coming of age, and in this, too, the ancients had shown the way: Vergil's pastoral eclogues witnessed the first stage of what came to be seen as the archetypal career of a poet. The vocational theme reached its culmination in "Lycidas": Milton's momentary questioning, in the face of Edward King's untimely death, of his own dedication to the "thankless muse" leads to a recommitment expressed by and embodied in the poem – a recommitment always seen, of course, with hindsight afforded by the later achievement of *Paradise Lost*. To be sure, Milton confirms a Christian apotheosis for Lycidas, "sunk low but mounted high / Through the dear might of him that walkt the waves" (163). What prevails, however, is an elaborately staged threat to – and recovery of – poetic vocation worked out through the key elements of pastoral: the idealized landscape, the nostalgia for better times, the consoling power of nature, the commingling of grief with topical commentary, and the reassertion of continuity and purpose in response to rupture and anxiety. Such conventions effected a distancing from emotion that emulated classical restraint and made poems of mourning easier to write. Discursive indirection, however, enabled not just a muting of emotion but a deflection of emotion, a shift from mourning to other tasks that could be performed *through* mourning. As the interwoven concerns of "Lycidas" reveal, the variety and interaction of these tasks permitted remarkable thematic range.[6]

Puritans who did not share Milton's regard for the ancients or his more optimistic view of human nature took the "functional" side in the mourning controversy, either rejecting the pastoral surface or deflecting it back to what they saw as its theological and soteriological core, as Milton himself briefly did in St. Peter's diatribe against the "Blind mouths" of the corrupt clergy. Consistent with corresponding reforms in preaching, liturgy, and church polity, this more severe elegiac model returned the poem of mourning to its most immediate function. In contrast to the

commemorations for "Asphodel" or "Lycidas," funeral elegies openly proclaimed their situational contexts by giving the real names of the deceased. Determined to adhere to what they saw as "real" rather than "fictive" discourse, funeral elegists refused to allow the commemoration of the dead to stray from its theological significance, which was, in their view, a literal significance that transcended artistic representation altogether. As in the plain-style sermon, there would be no mistaking why the poem existed or what it was trying to do.

To be sure, the young Milton possessed Arian tendencies that allowed for a less gloomy view of human potential than that held by his Calvinist contemporaries. A factor more important than theology, however, accounted for the contrast between "Lycidas" and New England's elegies. As Draper points out, that factor was social: the rise of a largely Puritan merchant class to wealth, power, and artistic patronage (*Funeral Elegy* 22). In contrast to aristocratic and academic readers of pastoral, this new audience made more pragmatic demands on art. For them, the ideal commemorative poem was at once less worldly – that is, more directly concerned with salvation – and more practical, in that it framed grief in explicitly religious terms familiar to the majority of actual mourners. Taking to heart Phoebus's lesson in "Lycidas" by shifting elegiac "fame" from the realm of poetry to the realm of piety, funeral elegists were far less indebted to Theocritus and Vergil than to the Bible, homiletic traditions, and the popular iconology of death fostered by funerary art, broadsides, and emblem books. These poets saw themselves as employing an Augustinian "high style" that eschewed ornamentation and was "created," as Ruth Wallerstein described it, "by the ardor of the thought itself, by the ardent contemplation of truths seen as value, as a motive of the will." "In this style," Wallerstein noted, "the Bible abounds" (28). While the occasional image – the weeping willow, the ministerial shepherd, and churchgoing flocks – afforded brief glimpses of a quasi-pastoral landscape, the ur-texts for these poems were the great biblical expressions of loss, especially David's poem for Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:19–27). Funeral elegists took seriously Paul's admonition to "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep," taking care to "Mind not high things" and to "Be not wise in your own conceits" (Romans 12:15–16). Unlike the pastoral elegist, typically a university-trained man of letters speaking as a professional "poet," the funeral elegist emulated Pauline humility by presenting the poem as a frankly amateur performance that repudiated the vocational preoccupations of the pastoral. Ben Jonson, that most insistently "clas-

sical" of Renaissance poets, provided striking expression of the aestheticizing of grief when he mourned his son as his "best piece of *poetrie*" (20). For most Puritans, this seemed a tragically wrongheaded reaction to an occasion as momentous as death. Marvell, for instance, was as deeply schooled as Jonson and Milton in the discursive indirection of pastoral, yet wrote his lament for Cromwell in a nontropic manner far removed from his mentor's model in "Lycidas." The funeral elegy succeeded, Puritans felt, only if it was *not* created as art. Indeed, its deeper message and aims, because divine, did not require a poet's skill so much as a prophet's vision.

At first, the plainer sort of elegy assumed virtually identical form in both Englands. A poem written in 1636 by "I. L." for Rev. John Rogers of Dedham, Essex, whose grandson would become president of Harvard, features most of the hallmarks of the New England elegy. Celebrating the "happy change and blessed gain" of a generalized saint, the poet praises "Our faithfull Moses" whose "graces" the reader is urged to "imitate": "So shalt thou live in happy state, / and pleasing in Gods sight" (Draper, *Century* 21). Like many New England commemorations, the poem ends with a call for survivors to repent in the face of a loss that signals divine disfavor with "Our sleepy formall carelessnesse, / in hearing of God's word" (Draper, *Century* 21). As the Rogers family illustrates, dissenting emigrants to the New World came chiefly from the English audience for such poems, and as a result, the plainer style of elegy proliferated there, becoming increasingly codified after the Restoration forced a sharpening of New England's cultural distinctiveness. At this time, too, funerary customs became more elaborate as a means of reinforcing a community of believers whose ties with England had been weakened. As William Scheick points out, the New England elegy in this later form separated from its English precedents by laying greater stress on the commemoration of a "collective self" through which survivors could absorb the saintly traits of the deceased ("Tombless Virtue" 290–96). Replete with predictable forms and conventional structures appropriate to this increased ritualization of mourning, the New England elegy may also have compensated for the liturgical severity of the Puritan service and provided a communal supplement, similar to that offered by the jeremiad, to the lonely rigors of meditative self-scrutiny.[7]

Once established in New England, the funeral elegy achieved remarkable stability, resisting the shift toward neoclassicism and sentimentality, which began to mark the English elegy soon after the Restoration, until

well into the eighteenth century. This conservatism points up the elegy's close fit with social realities in early New England, where funeral poems, circulated in manuscript or broadside among members of tight-knit communities, were written for a far more intimate circle of readers than those addressed in the published and more self-consciously "literary" poems of London and the university towns. Even more importantly, the New England elegy, like the English funeral elegy, was written for a very different *kind* of reader than that addressed by the pastoral. Unlike Milton, whose poem appeared in a commemorative volume produced by and for Christian humanists well acquainted with classical discourse, elegists in New England wrote for entire communities. They could not risk undermining the devotional mandates of grief with pastoral conventions which presented a pagan surface that might be taken too seriously by the uninitiated. In keeping with this broader notion of readership, elegies in New England were not written to be "appreciated" as art in anything like a modern sense or even in the sense that Milton's Cambridge readers would have appreciated "Lycidas." Rather, they were written to be *used* in a process of grieving that was as valid for the illiterate farmer as for the university-trained minister. If death was no respecter of persons, death's grim democracy would also be made to hold sway over the poem of mourning by increasing its accessibility. The duty to clarify death's significance for all was too important to squander in mere verbal display.

As O. B. Hardison once observed, criticism has never known quite what to do with the occasional poem (107–8). Indeed, the very conditions of its making have always worked against it, since literary historians have traditionally believed that art transcends historical conditions. No form of public verse, perhaps, has suffered more from unhistorical critical treatments than elegies, especially those poems which insist on grounding themselves as explicitly as possible in specific occasions of loss. The homiletic and situational directness of such poems in both Englands doomed them to subliterary status, especially in light of the subsequent prestige of the pastoral as the only truly artistic poem of mourning. The preference of academic criticism for the self-contained, ideologically "neutral" work of art authorized a certain indirection in the commemorative act. If the occasional poem failed to transcend its specific occasion, the result was obscurity or charges of patent sentimentality. Attracted to the thematic swerve from death to art enacted by the pastoral elegy, critics considered the degree to which a poem may have brought real comfort to its initial readers irrelevant,

perhaps even harmful, to its artistic success. This view was nowhere more evident than in the quick and vehement rejoinders to Samuel Johnson's famous attack on the pastoral conventions of "Lycidas" as "trifling fictions" lacking in any "real passion." Thomas Wharton, in his 1791 edition of Milton's minor poetry, made a telling distinction when he conceded that "Lycidas" contained "perhaps more poetry than sorrow. But let us read it for its poetry." In 1818 Hazlitt cited with approval Milton's "tender gloom" in the poem, "a wayward abstraction, a forgetfulness of his subject in the serious reflections that arise out of it." And in 1854 Henry Hallam responded to Johnson's charge by arguing that "many poems will yield an exquisite pleasure to the imagination that produce no emotion in the heart; or none at least except through associations independent of the subject" (Elledge 230–32, 236). We might add "independent of textual function": even if Johnson's insistence on "passion" was naive, he was merely stressing functional rather than formalist standards for the poetry of loss.[8]

The chief factor, however, in our inability to read the Puritan elegy on its own terms may well be the professional critic's traditional preference for secular responses to death rather than theological structures of the sort embraced by most seventeenth-century mourners. An elegy became an "enduring monument" by exchanging religious ideology for a more general framing of grief that proved attractive to later readers and critics who read for art, not solace. The attempt of later readers to isolate an "aesthetic" experience of funerary texts is encapsulated by Wallerstein's comment that Milton "universalizes" his experience by putting it "not in a religious form but in an artistic form" (113). Seen as compelling support for an essentialist notion of beauty and as a witness to art's transcendence of history, the pastoral elegy became the supreme *monumentum aere perennius*. It defined an elegiac ideal that obscured the viability of other poems of mourning that stubbornly resisted the pastoral compulsion to aestheticize loss.

Standards of taste that would make Milton the foundational poet of the British canon were largely in place when the sixteen-year-old Franklin began slipping the Dogood essays into his brother's paper. Given the enormous prestige of "Lycidas," it is no surprise that Silence Dogood's recipe set the tone for subsequent American readings of early New England's popular counterparts of Milton's great monody. In these first looks backward, developing notions of artistic value were reinforced by literary patriotism and a consequent historiography based on the search

for national origins. Within this agenda, crude strengths found in the early poems were cast as premonitions of American vigor, while artistic weaknesses underscored how far the new nation had come. Because Puritan verse accorded well with this construction of nationalism, early historians of American literature approached the poetry with an oddly patronizing filiopiety. The New England Fathers were tough but unrefined, and what they lacked was precisely what the subsequent development of American letters had provided. Among "Puritan" traits cited for approval were honesty, practicality, plainness in speech, and a hard-nosed dedication to duty – all of which seemed to find satisfying embodiment in poems that seemed nothing if not artlessly sincere. Late in life Franklin summarized the eighteenth-century retrospective on Puritan poetry when he characterized his maternal grandfather's "occasional Pieces" as having been written "in the homespun Verse of that Time and People." When later critics looked back on the poems of old New England, they agreed with Franklin in finding "a good deal of Decent Plainness & manly Freedom" (1312–13) but very little art.

The disciplinary mandate to construct a "literary" America left scant room for the "homespun," in part because the enterprise depended on a clear distinction between "high" and "popular" art that was becoming crucial to literary studies generally. The Puritan elegy, like most Puritan verse, was relegated to the popular side of the divide, as were later poems that displayed many of its superficial features. Some of these poems, printed as popular ballads in the newspapers, described sensational deaths like murders or executions and continued to thrive well into the nineteenth century (Coffin 29–71). Others, wedded to theological assumptions softer than those held in early New England and sentimentalized beyond recognition, extended the tradition of accessible poems of loss into the domestic sphere as part of the "feminization" of death described by Ann Douglas (240–49). These latter poems, precursors of the obituary verses still printed in today's papers, found their nemesis in Franklin's fellow printer, Mark Twain. Emmeline Grangerford, as Huck Finn solemnly reports, spun out her "tributes" for the deceased so efficiently that she "didn't ever have to stop to think." When a hard-to-rhyme name finally stumped her, Emmeline simply "pined away," a victim of life's messy intrusion into an absurdly rigid poetic (726). In their dismissal of the popular elegy, including its Puritan forebear, romantics and realists found common ground. One belief that Twain and his romantic antagonists shared was the expectation that a poem of mourning be a *poem*, a self-contained object to be

savored primarily for its aesthetic effect. If it was not, it was dismissed as a "folk" expression that only reconfirmed the achievement of canonical elegy.

Early readings of New England's elegies fit well into the creation of a coherent national history based on Whig progressivism. Although the underlying impulse was patriotic, critics looked elsewhere – chiefly, to artistic standards of the British privileged classes – for their aesthetic moorings. The first reconstructions of "early American literature" drew largely on British canonical standards that helped seal the critical fate of the Puritan elegy as an expression of cultural primitivism. In 1878 Moses Coit Tyler brought this view into a framework of Victorian positivism that seemed all the more viable because of Tyler's impressive recovery of historical and biographical facts surrounding the verse. Noting the popularity of elegies and epitaphs in early New England, Tyler maintained that Puritan commemorations were burdened with "those literary quirks and puns that were then thought to be among the graces of a threnody" (231). Believing that the artistically successful elegist managed to break free from such devices, Tyler praised John Norton the younger's poem on Anne Bradstreet because it seemed atypical, even though Norton "once or twice slipped into grotesqueness of conceit, and funereal frivolity" (263–64). Urian Oakes's famous elegy on Thomas Shepard II, which Tyler judged an even better poem, revealed a "true imaginative vision" that was nonetheless "blurred" by "patches of the prevailing theological jargon" (270). Such readings underscored Tyler's general belief in an "inappeasable feud" in Puritan culture "between religion and art" (228): art could not emerge until religion had been eliminated.[9]

Historians followed Tyler's lead in romanticizing Puritan verse as the stunted art of a "frontier" people. In 1890 Edmund Clarence Stedman called the "poetical relics" of early New England "the curios of a museum – the queer, ugly specimens of an unhistoric age" (33), "unhistoric" because a truly "literary" history had not yet begun. Such comments fit well with that species of geographical determinism which wedded the Puritan psyche to the flinty land that supposedly nurtured it. In 1903 Julian Abernethy observed that the Puritan "renouncement of all aesthetic influences left an impress upon the character of New England that is even yet visible, like the barren stretches of rock that scar its green-robed mountain sides in summer" (48). The early elegies and epitaphs confirmed a stifled artistry well matched with this rugged proto-America. As Abernethy remarked, "many a lichen-grown gravestone

still testifies to their struggles to express some freak of fancy in punning rhymes" (48). Of the "thousands of lines" penned by New England's earliest poets, Samuel Marion Tucker wrote in 1917, there was "scarcely a line of genuine poetry, or a single poem worth preservation in its entirety" (153). Read as a halting expression of an embryonic American character, the New England elegy was granted a certain unpolished strength. But read within the perspective of the British canon, the source for Tucker's definition of "genuine poetry," it was merely old-fashioned. In 1929 Draper saw the American funeral elegy as a fossilized repository of "archaic characteristics" already abandoned in England, a darkly Gothic exercise in which "the edifying gloom of the living was seemingly accounted of more moment than the Salvation of the dead" (*Funeral Elegy* 176, 163). That same year Trentwell Mason White and Paul William Lebmann, arguing that Norton's poem for Bradstreet exhibited "certain characteristic grotesqueries of the period" (144), agreed that Oakes's elegy for Shepard might have been "beautiful" were it not for "certain passages filled with the literary and religious hocus-pocus that dogged so much of the early writers' works" (146). Similar blinders, of course, affected readings of Puritan verse generally. As Charles Angoff stated in the early 1930s, "The Puritans were in possession of everything necessary for the creation of living poetry, with the exception of the most important thing of all – a free soul" (196). The postromantic expectation that the serious poem should subvert religious ideology – that it must articulate the unmediated responses of a "free soul" – rendered historically sensitive readings of the Puritan elegy impossible. Ola Winslow flatly stated that "American literature could not begin" until the colonists shifted their interest "from heaven to the thirteen colonies" (xviii). Puritans could not write true poetry because they were not yet true "Americans," not yet free from the beliefs that made them Puritans in the first place.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Barrett Wendell stated that Puritan writing told "a story of unique national inexperience" (55). What hampered early New Englanders in their development as "Americans" was their commitment to a faith that was unapologetically antidemocratic, anti-individualistic, and anti-aesthetic. Abernethy agreed that New England's poets would not improve until they had been liberated from Puritan theology, with "the unshackling of men's minds in the period of the Revolution" (49). A more positive assessment came in 1909 from William Bradley Otis, who argued that early American verse was to be appreciated not because it lacked "American" traits, but

because it exhibited them fully despite the straitjacket of religion: the poetry "is, as a whole, characteristic of the broad, fresh, original, and liberty-loving nature of the land which gave it birth" (ix). Despite his application of later aesthetic and subjective standards, Otis was among the few critics of his time to achieve a measure of historical empathy with the impulses behind the Puritan elegy. In early New England, Otis conceded, "the death of a good man is not only not depressing, but is often even a source of poetic exaltation" (60). To a degree, critics could accept such a statement as historical fact. They could not imagine, however, that the fact had any but the most devastating artistic consequences.

After the Great War shook the easy positivism that had marked Victorian historical writing, a few critics took a more relativist view of the Puritan elegy. Conceding that early New Englanders held very different assumptions about art than those held by modern readers, Kenneth Murdock remarked in 1927 that the elegies preserved in Joseph Tompson's diary "were written not for us but for him" (*Handkerchiefs* xviii). Puritans believed that "If a poem could edify or console," Murdock observed, "it deserved to be brought forth" (xix). In addition, because early New Englanders saw so much premature death, it would be "worse than foolish to read unmindful of their spirit" (xxi). When he assessed the poems, however, Murdock found it difficult to practice the historical relativism that he preached, conceding that John Wilson's anagrams "lack any spark of imaginative fervor to kindle them to poetry" (lix) and concluding that "When all is said and done, the bulk of the world's great poetry is no whit increased by bringing these forgotten works. . .to light" (lxii). Their one merit, Murdock wrote, was that they "ring true" with emotional sincerity (lxiii). The artistic failure of early New England's elegies was attributed not only to the artistic choke-hold of religion, but to situational and social limitations arising from the colonial condition, especially an absence of leisure for writing and the lack of an audience with sufficient literary sophistication. Thomas G. Wright (86–90) and Murdock both argued that Puritan poets should be compared with English poets who wrote for similar audiences of "simpler folk" (*Handkerchiefs* lxxii). Samuel Eliot Morison, agreeing that "Colonial conditions are never favorable to poetry," also tried to approach the verse of early New England "as an expression of the thought, feeling, and emotions of the times" (*Intellectual Life* 210, 211). But the resistance to historical relativism in assessing these poems remained strong. Suggesting that the elegies were a predictable response to a lack of funerary ritual,

Morison concluded that these poems, like most occasional verse, were "indifferent" in quality.

The hardships of colonial life were real enough, and citing them was the first step toward a more meaningful historicizing of a Puritan aesthetic of loss. Most critics, however, refused to acknowledge that art produced within traditional societies might best be judged by standards other than belletristic. Of critics writing in the first half of the twentieth century, only Harold Jantz made any real effort to defend the Puritan aesthetic on historical grounds. Commenting on the standard critical response to New England's earliest poetry, Jantz observed that "One reason for our patronizing attitude has been the misapplication of the critical standards of eighteenth-century smoothness and nineteenth-century romantic lyricism to seventeenth-century Baroque verse which had no interest in being either smooth or romantic." For Jantz, past texts did not exist solely to gratify present taste: "The poetic intent, the artistic will of the time was simply different from our own." Consequently, "poetic techniques were used with which we are no longer familiar" (*First Century* 6–7). To Jantz's "eighteenth-century smoothness" and "nineteenth-century romantic lyricism" I would add twentieth-century formalism as a third blinder. In 1938 Thomas Johnson, Taylor's rediscoverer, observed that while the best Puritan elegies were marked by "dignity and heartfelt simplicity" and "a tender pathos," they failed in terms of poetic form (551). A decade later Stanley Williams agreed that "a touching simplicity and pathos" comprised the Puritan elegy's sole virtues (23). Conceding the sincerity of a poem was, of course, faint praise indeed in an era dominated by formalist aesthetic criteria promoted by Eliot and the New Critics. The "heartfelt simplicity" and "tender pathos" of early New England's elegies only reinforced the status of the laments that followed "Lycidas" into the elegiac canon. By substituting aesthetics for religion, the pastoral seemed to validate ideological constants shared by Renaissance humanism, rationalistic optimism, romantic individualism, Freudian confessionalism, and the high modernist embrace of all these traditions. Great art about death is timeless because it manages to channel grief into the creative act. People die but the ideal elegy remains, monumental and enduring.

Should an elegy offer beauty or solace? While it's easy to say both, this confident answer begs two fundamental questions: whose definition of beauty? and whose definition of solace? To answer these questions is to be pushed inexorably into history. I have recounted the story of the